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War for free flow of information

The following comments were recently delivered by G. Fred Wickman, a Kansas City Star newsman, at the Unity Awards in Media ceremony at Lincoln University, Jefferson City, Mo. He is regional director of the Society of Professional Journalists, Sigma Delta Chi.

"WHAT DID you do during the war?" I think the term "war" is appropriate for us journalists. If not that, "struggle" certainly is.

We are in a conflict with the behind-closed-door people who are seeking to block freedom of information and, thus, an informed public at nearly every step. After all, one of our purposes in the Society of Professional Journalists, Sigma Delta Chi, is to advance the cause of freedom of information. And advance it we must.

Journalists are under assault at almost every level by those who say no news is good news. These nay-sayers range from the people who try to close school board and city council meetings to those in the federal government, which is trying again to become a closed segment of society by emasculating the Freedom of Information Act.

We journalists, as never before, are not taking "no comment" for an answer. We are willing to spend hours, days, even years combing through public records, all in the name of keeping the public informed. There are people in high places who don't like that. Why? Because it is their blemishes we expose. If these officials were doing their jobs correctly, in the first place, they would have nothing to fear from the light of public disclosure. Well, you may say, there are some things you just don't talk about in public. Is that true in government, where we — you

and me and everyone in this room — foot the bill in some small (and large) way? These are our employees, our records. And they are accountable to us.

Some of the same people clamoring for a reduction in the scope of government are destroying the means by which we can all see how, or if, that reduction occurs. The Freedom of Information Act is a valuable tool in checking the accountability of government.

Yet, Sen. Robert Dole (R., Kan.) is bent on slicing the act apart. And he is not going through the committee hearing process. Dole has introduced floor legislation that would circumvent the voices of those who want to come to committee hearings to cry—not for a reduction of freedom of information—but for an increase.

HOW ARE WE to wage the fight? How are we to cope with the setbacks we already have suffered; especially in the imposition of criminal penalties for printing names of CIA agents—government employees paid by us?

First, we begin locally. We know our state, city and national laws that allow us and the citizens who read our work and hear our broadcasts a look at government. When we see that a meeting is about to be closed, a record about to be hidden, a courtroom proceeding about to begin behind closed doors, we should raise hell.

We must ask why we must ask for a suspension of the procedure until we can summon our publication's or our station's lawyer for help. We must push for stronger laws, with penalties, against closed meetings, closed records and closed courts.